The UN in East Timor: all the trappings of a colonial protectorate

Linda Tenenbaum
6 November 1999

On October 25 the United Nations Security Council voted to set up an interim administration in East Timor with the purported aim of assisting the tiny territory's transition to "independence. As with the 15-nation "peacekeeping" force (INTERFET), currently deployed under Australian leadership, the real purpose of the mission is to open the half-island up to the major powers. Lucrative investments will be on offer, as well as the exploitation of East Timor's natural resources and significant reserves of cheap labour.

The United Nations Transitional Administration East Timor (UNTAET) will be fully functioning by next February. It will have full control over the territory, comprising 8,950 "peacekeeping" troops, 200 military observers, 1,640 police and thousands of civilian administrators.

All judicial, administrative and legislative power will vest in a single administrator—the Special Representative of the Secretary General—who will report directly to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. He will wield the same kind of authority as a colonial viceroy or governor, operating in conjunction with a small committee of appointed officials, including two deputies, a chief-of-staff and a force commander in charge of the "peacekeeping" troops.

UNTAET has already become a battleground for competing interests. Australia, which has significant investments and strategic concerns in East Timor, and Portugal, its former colonial ruler, are jockeying for position. While Australia appears to have gained a head start with its leadership of INTERFET and some 5,000 troops on the ground, Portugal has been forging ahead on the diplomatic front.

Portugal's push received a boost with Annan's appointment of Sergio Veirea de Mello, a 51-year-old Brazilian, as interim head of the civilian administration. De Mello, one of the rising stars of the UN, set up the UN civilian administration in Kosovo before handing over to the current administrator in July. Most significantly he is a Portuguese speaker.

His appointment followed weeks of heavy courting of the National Council of Timorese Resistance (CNRT) and its leader Xanana Gusmao by the Portuguese government.

On October 1, Gusmao was flown into Lisbon on a Portuguese Air Force jet to a hero's welcome. Campaigning in the country's national elections was suspended while he addressed a specially convened session of the parliament. He then met with the leader of the seven-nation group of Portuguese speaking nations (CPLP), comprising Portugal and its former colonies, including Brazil. On the basis of the discussion, the CPLP reportedly hoped "to welcome an independent East Timor at next June's annual summit."

In Lisbon, Gusmao announced the formation of a bilateral liaison group between the CNRT and the Portuguese government. "I am honoured to work with the Portuguese government to determine the future direction of East Timor," he declared. During his visit, negotiations began between Petrogal, Portugal's gas company and CNRT representative Mari Alkatiri over Timor's extensive oilfields. Before leaving the country, Xanana was awarded one of Portugal's highest honours.

Less than two weeks later, the Portuguese government revealed it had offered to pay the salaries of all East Timorese civil servants in the new administration, and that these would be paid in the Portuguese currency via the Portuguese Banco Nacional Ultramarino (BNU).

Shortly after, the CNRT confirmed that Portuguese would be the national language, at least for the time being, and the escudo the national currency. (The final decision on these matters, however, will be made not by the CNRT but by the UN, the IMF and the World Bank. Representatives of the latter toured the territory during the past week.) A whole consortium of Portuguese companies has been established to do business in the new "nation".

Having been left badly behind, Australia is scrambling to catch up. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer has been lobbying in New York for Australia to lead UNTAET's "peacekeeping force" once INTERFET has been disbanded. Downer's difficulties have been compounded by opposition throughout Asia to Australia's interventionist role, forcing

© World Socialist Web Site

him to remain somewhat circumspect. CNRT leader, Nobel prize winner and longtime Australian resident, Jose Ramos Horta, has become Australia's major advocate. Earlier this week he publicly insisted that Australia lead the force.

Malaysia has also put its hat into the ring, but has been roundly denounced by Horta, supposedly for its past support for Indonesia's actions in East Timor. Why Australia's recognition of Indonesia's annexation of the territory in 1975, and its subsequent collaboration with the 24-year repression of the East Timorese is not similarly abhorrent to the CNRT leader remains unexplained.

Having been excluded from the Australian-led INTERFET force, Portugal is insisting, with Gusmao's endorsement, on a significant military role in the new administration. At least 1,000 Portuguese troops are being readied to participate, while the Portuguese frigate, the Vasco Da Gama, with a crew of 202 is already docked in Darwin, 600 km from East Timor, waiting to be transferred to UNTAET's command.

Meanwhile, Australian business is trying to get in on the act. In late October, more than 450 company representatives attended a forum in Canberra, sponsored by the Department of Trade, to begin planning investments in East Timor. Australia's trade commissioner for international projects, Alistair Nicholas, warned that of the 3,700 companies that had already registered with the UN, fewer than 100 were Australian. The country's proximity to East Timor, he insisted, meant that Australian business could still reap many of the contracts on offer.

According to the *Australian Financial Review*, Ms Ene Juurma, a manager of the employer association, Australian Business Ltd commented during the forum “Australian businesses have never been in a better position to get into the aid market.”

UNTAET's establishment will mark the full implementation of the agreement on the future of East Timor, struck between Indonesia, Portugal and the United Nations on May 5 of this year.

The agreement stipulated three stages. First, the holding of a UN-sponsored referendum in which the East Timorese people would vote on whether to remain an autonomous province within Indonesia, or to become an “independent” nation. Second, a vote in the Indonesian parliament, the MPR, to ratify the referendum's outcome. Third, the establishment of a UN-controlled transitional administration, for a period of several years.

From the standpoint of the signatories, events have proceeded remarkably according to plan. The referendum, held on August 30 saw a huge majority of the population vote for independence. Less than two months later, the Indonesian parliament ratified that vote and five days after that, the UN Security Council voted unanimously for the resolution establishing UNTAET. The resolution was drafted by Britain, and presented to Portugal, which gave its blessing, before being handed over to Kofi Annan in early October.

In the period between the referendum and the votes in the MPR and UN Security Council, some 75 percent of the East Timorese population were forcibly evacuated from their homes by the Indonesian army (TNI) and its militia gangs. Most of the country's infrastructure was destroyed, including electricity and water supplies, sewerage, health facilities, schools, housing, transport and government buildings. Militia thugs butchered many hundreds, if not thousands, of people. While around 120 bodies have been discovered, tens of thousands of people remain classified as “missing”.

What transpired in the first three weeks of September was a tragedy of immense proportions, but one that was anticipated by all the parties to the agreement. This fact has now been fully and incontrovertibly documented.

Left out of the agreement, and struggling to maintain its profile in the region, the Australian government seized upon the militia rampage as an opportunity to intervene. Having prepared its troops well in advance, it prevailed upon the UN to offer it command of the UN-sponsored INTERFET force.

By the time the troops went in on September 20, all the damage had been done. Dili and most of the towns and villages of East Timor were destroyed, and the population completely traumatised.

But INTERFET's objective was never to “save” the East Timorese people. Its brief was to stabilise the “security” situation and enable stages two and three of the May 5 agreement to be implemented. Now UNTAET—to all intents and purposes, a new colonial authority—can begin its work.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site